



## U.S. is opening lines to Libya

By Barbara Slavin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Among Third World leaders, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi has always stood out — usually for the wrong reasons.



Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, right, walks with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

By John Moore, AP

An army colonel who seized power in the oil-rich North African nation 35 years ago, Gadhafi, 62, was branded "the most dangerous man in the world" by the Reagan administration. No other ruler in power today is tied to so many American civilian deaths: 189 killed when Pan Am Flight 103 exploded in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

But Gadhafi's decision last year to end a fledgling nuclear weapons program — after agreeing to pay relatives of the Pan Am victims \$10 million per family — has spurred a new U.S. policy of engagement.

Tuesday, the State Department confirmed that a U.S. diplomat is based in Tripoli, the Libyan capital, for the first time since 1979. Libya's foreign minister, meanwhile, was in Britain inviting Prime Minister Tony Blair to meet Gadhafi.

This month, the State Department may lift a 23-year ban on travel to Libya by ordinary Americans. Other sanctions may be removed soon.

Advocates of restoring U.S. ties with Libya say the new policy will have benefits:

- It will encourage Gadhafi to continue cooperating with the United States in the war on terrorism and against weapons proliferation. He has allowed U.S. experts to remove 55,000 pounds of weapons and related documents for examination in the USA. The material should help unravel other nations' proliferation secrets, including Pakistan's now-acknowledged marketing of nuclear know-how.

- It could serve as a model for other rogue states. U.S. officials are suggesting, for example, that North Korea also give up weapons of mass destruction in return for economic and diplomatic concessions.

- It could allow U.S. oil companies to return to Libya, and other U.S. companies would also benefit.

The issue is not one of "rehabilitating" Gadhafi but of continuing to press for change, says Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., who last month became the first U.S. congressman to see Gadhafi in two decades. "At appropriate intervals, we provide a carrot." Lantos envisions full diplomatic ties in a year.

Others argue that Washington should be wary of restoring relations with a regime that has a record of impulsive policy changes and human rights abuses. Gadhafi runs a dilapidated nation of 5 million weary of his tribal oligarchy and is said to be grooming his son, Seif el-Islam, to succeed him.

"Gadhafi is beyond rehabilitation; he's a criminal and a murderer who mocks representative democracy," says Mohamed Eljahmi of the American Libyan Freedom Alliance, a Virginia-based group pressing for democracy in Libya.

Gadhafi cozies up to Western politicians before the English media, then he insults them in Arabic, Eljahmi says. He says the Libyan news agency, JANA, recently referred to U.S. Iraq administrator L. Paul Bremer as "al-bul" Bremer. "Al-bul" is Arabic for urine.

U.S. moves to restore ties with Libya predate the Bush administration. Clinton administration officials discussed removing Libya from a State Department list of terrorism sponsors in 1999 after Gadhafi turned over two intelligence agents for trial in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. One was convicted three years ago.

However, Gadhafi has not apologized for the bombing, and no high-level Libyan has been charged. The Justice Department insists that the case remains open. But there have been no indications that the Bush administration is pursuing it, says Stephanie Bernstein, whose husband, Michael, was aboard the downed flight.

Especially troubling, Bernstein says, is that the lead Libyan negotiator with U.S. and British diplomats on the Pan Am settlement and the weapons issue has been Musa Kusa. Kusa was deputy head of Libyan intelligence when the jet was blown apart, putting him in a position to be aware of the plot. Kusa now heads Libyan intelligence.

Some Pan Am families and Libyan dissidents charge that the Bush administration is trumpeting success with Libya in part to distract attention from the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Critics say bolstering Gadhafi also appears to contradict another stated Bush priority: promoting democracy in the Arab world.

"We got cover for the Bush policy in Iraq," Bernstein says, "and we're ensuring that Gadhafi's family will stay in power for a long time to come."

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